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Public Values and the Human Services System

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Washington's human services system is the institutional expression of broadly held public values contained in a variety of statutes. Above all else, we value our children, our families, and our elders. We care deeply about the quality of life in our communities.

We insist on high standards of personal responsibility, hard work, and accountability for our actions - and, at the same time, we have an abundance of compassion for people of all ages who need help, hope, and opportunity. We express these values in the way we live, and in the way we govern ourselves. Our governor and legislators translate these values into laws, budgets and programs. The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and its partners implement public policies made by these elected leaders.

The relationship between our values and our human services programs is bounded by fiscal constraints, competing needs, and constant change in our culture and our economy. We don't often discuss how these complex relationships affect the human services enterprise, or how accurately our values and our programs are aligned.

Today, we need to have that discussion. We are entering a time of particularly intense change and challenge. We cannot sustain current programs and services within the constraints of today's state budgets. Our population is growing, health care costs are rising much faster than the rate of inflation, and a long list of unmet needs - from endangered salmon to job training programs - compete for dwindling state dollars.

Given these circumstances, it's vital that we all understand what our human services system is, what it does, and how the values we care about are reflected in the programs we pay for.

Photo courtesy DSHS, Aging and Adult Services